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AUTHOR Franzblau, Robert H.
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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Robert Kapilow, Yale-educated classical- and Broadway-music conductor, educates diverse audiences about classical music. Phenomenological and case study methods were used to explore: (1) what music education has meant to Kapilow; and (2) how this view influenced his practice of teaching and conducting. Analysis of in-depth interviews and field notes revealed three major themes which portray the outward appearance of Kapilow's teaching activities: (1) the explosive pace with which Kapilow taught; (2) the interactive nature of his sessions; and (3) his unpretentious and compelling use of language. Kapilow personified two traditions in the music education field, that of Music Education as Aesthetic Education (MEAE) and Comprehensive Musicianship (CM). Kapilow's teaching can serve as a model for music teachers faced with administrative and political pressure to implement the National Standards. Robert Kapilow inspires each music educator to accept the Standards as a personal challenge to improve his or her teaching process, rather than as a prefabricated curriculum product mandated for implementation. (EH)

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Aesthetic Education as a Subversive Activity: A Phenomenological Case Study of Robert Kapilow

Robert H. Franzblau

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Please direct correspondence to:

Robert H. Franzblau

835 St. John's Court

Crete, NE 68333

402-826-4546

SO 028 587

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Abstract

Leaders in the music education profession have for decades encouraged conductors of school music ensembles to enrich their students' learning by approaching the performance experience as an opportunity to cultivate greater musical understanding and promote positive attitudes towards music, in addition to mastering performance skills. In spite of such ongoing curricular reform efforts, however, public performance remains the primary goal in most school music programs. Reform-minded conductors do not lack access to models of ideal curricula; what they need are inspiring examples of reform-minded teaching.

New York city native Robert Kapilow has enjoyed wide popularity for his enthusiastic and insightful manner of introducing classical music to new listeners. The purpose of this study was to explore how Kapilow educates diverse audiences about music. Phenomenological and case study methods were used to explore (a) what music education meant to him, and (b) how this view influenced his practice of teaching and conducting. By exploring these questions, I gained a greater understanding of how the roles of conductor and music educator met in his professional life, and how his example of effective music teaching could inform the classroom practice of conductors.

Analysis of in-depth interviews and field notes revealed Kapilow's experience of teaching music is characterized by the play of metaphors. His statement, "People will always need what I call an aliveness to the world around them," expresses not only a personal value; it also reveals how Kapilow has brought meaning to his career as a musician and teacher. Inspired by the book Teaching as a Subversive Activity his goals for music education parallel those of aesthetic education.

Aesthetic Education as a Subversive Activity: A Phenomenological Case Study of Robert Kapilow

Bands and orchestras in American schools are most often modeled after professional bands and orchestras, where the ultimate goal of the activity is public performance of music (Birge, 1937; Mark, 1986; Fritts, 1991). While such groups instill a sense of accomplishment among members and the level of performance is often quite impressive, many performers graduate from high school without an understanding and appreciation of music's expressive nature (Abeles, Hoffer, & Klotman, 1994). To address this issue, conductors are being urged by leaders in music education to approach performance as an opportunity to cultivate greater musical understanding and promote positive attitudes towards music, in addition to mastering performance skills.

This recommendation is not new. In 1965, Ernst and Gary suggested that ensemble rehearsals allow students "to improve not only their technical skills but to grow also in their understandings of, and attitudes toward, music as an art" (p. 206). During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Comprehensive Musicianship movement challenged music teachers at all levels to integrate the performance of music with the study of music theory, history, composition, and pedagogy (Music Educators Journal, 1968). Bennett Reimer's seminal work, A Philosophy of Music Education (1970) explored the question, "How can music education become aesthetic education?" Regarding the role of performance groups he stated, "Musical mastery must serve the cause of musical perception. Mastery alone can be a sterile, terminal thing. When skilled performance is used to illuminate musical expressiveness, the resulting understanding penetrates very deeply" (1968, p. 112). Finally, the "new" national standards for music education (Music Educators National Conference, 1994) bear a striking resemblance to the musical outcomes listed in Ernst and Gary's 1965 book. In spite of these efforts, however, most school bands, choirs, and orchestras continue to pursue performance mastery as their dominant goal.

Conductors who are sympathetic to the idea of engaging students in educational interactions with performance repertoire do not lack theoretical and philosophical standards, however; what they need are sufficiently detailed portraits of this type of effective teaching. Perhaps by looking outside of their immediate professional circles for these examples, ensemble directors can improve their traditional ways of teaching which have been simultaneously embraced (by most directors) and denounced (by their own leadership) for decades.

New York City native Robert Kapilow has enjoyed wide popularity for his enthusiastic and insightful manner of introducing classical music to new listeners. A graduate of Yale University and the Eastman School of Music, he interrupted his college education to study composition with the legendary Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Hired as conductor of the Yale Symphony at age 24, he broke with academia six years later when an invitation to conduct a few performances on Broadway turned into a string of 322 consecutive shows. He was captivated with how Broadway audiences were actively involved in the music to which they were listening, a relationship which he felt was nonexistent in the concert hall. Since that early experience, Kapilow has built a successful career of acquainting diverse audiences with the joys he finds in classical music.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how Kapilow educates diverse audiences about music. Phenomenological and case study methods were used to explore (a) what music education meant to him, and (b) how this view influenced his practice of teaching and conducting. By exploring these questions, I gained a greater understanding of how the roles of conductor and music educator met in his professional life, and how his example of effective music teaching could inform the classroom practice of conductors.

Methodology

This study combined two traditions of qualitative research: phenomenology and case study. Characteristics borrowed from phenomenological research included (a) focus on the immediate experience of the phenomenon, without any *a priori* theory, (b) in-depth, open-ended interviews as the primary data source with extensive verbatim quotes used in the document, (c) focus on the meanings the participant brought to his own lived experience of the phenomenon, (d) overt and subjective presence of the researcher in data collection and analysis, and (e) an analytical process which included phenomenological steps of bracketing, reduction, horizonalizing, and the composition of textural and structural descriptions. Features adopted from case study methodology included (a) multiple data sources, (b) a single-case design, and (c) rationale for choosing the subject of the research.

Data Sources

Robert Kapilow was interviewed at three separate times and was observed at 28 educational sessions over the course of six months. In addition, 24 cassette tapes of various lectures, interviews, and educational performances by Kapilow were collected and used to supplement the

interviews and observations. Articles from newspapers and magazines about his activities provided additional perspectives.

Interviews

The phenomenological approach to the research problem required extensive, open-ended interviews with Kapilow (Moustakas, 1994). Seidman (1991) proposed a three-part series of interviews which focus on the participant's life history, the details of his experience, and reflection on the meaning of that experience. I visited the New York City area for one week to conduct these interviews with Kapilow. The interviews were taped on a portable cassette recorder and transcribed verbatim.

Observations

Live observations of Kapilow's teaching activities were made in cooperation with the Kansas City Friends of Chamber Music. Their artist-in-residence program, called MusiConnection, featured Robert Kapilow as musical commentator in collaboration with two professional string quartets. The audiences for these presentations were developed by the Friends of Chamber Music to encompass a diversity of individuals. They ranged from sixth-grade students to residents in a retirement village; from non-musicians to graduate students in a music conservatory. During each event, I took extensive field notes describing the date and time, the physical setting, the actors involved, and the activities observed. In addition, reflective notes were made in the margins as appropriate, in keeping with the qualitative researcher's disposition for simultaneous data collection and analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Handwritten field notes of each MusiConnection session were retyped verbatim into separate text files.

Data Analysis

In order to capture the essence of Kapilow's own subjective experience and explore the beliefs which guide his professional activities, phenomenological methods of analysis guided the case study. Both field notes and interview transcripts underwent analysis procedures suggested by Moustakas (1994). In this process, the inherent logic of Kapilow's concept was allowed to emerge from his words, without any *a priori* theorizing or imposition of existing models of music education.

Findings

Texture

From an initial list of over 80 horizons, three major themes emerged which portray the outward appearance of Kapilow's teaching activities: (a) the explosive pace with which Kapilow taught, (b) the interactive nature of his sessions, and (c) his unpretentious and compelling use of language.

Explosive Pace. Kapilow's most overt characteristic was his seemingly limitless supply of energy. He stated that Beethoven brought "an unprecedented sense of urgency and breathtaking pace" to the symphony; Kapilow could easily have applied these words to his own musical commentary as well. If "Sesame Street" has instilled a rapid pace of life in generations of Americans, Kapilow did not seem a bit concerned about it; he relished it.

> We have an instant gratification culture in which people are used to having a resolution in TV plots every 30 minutes. That is America's time scale. You can have a discussion good/bad, you can have gloom and doom -- I'm not interested. It's what's so. (Kapilow, 1995b)

The speed and fluency of Kapilow's verbal presentation was reminiscent of jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker's musical style. Kapilow seemed to be talking in "double time," and his comments were perfectly fashioned, just like Parker's solos. His fast pace and high energy level was a natural outgrowth of his personal life: he usually sleeps only four hours a night.

Interaction. When asked how his sessions differ from Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts" of the 1960s, Kapilow responded:

> If you've listened to those tapes, as much as I admire them, they would completely never fly to today's kids. He is still an adult sitting up there lecturing. Kids today, they want to do. In one word how I've gone beyond that is interactive. (Kapilow, 1995b)

What audience members did at a Kapilow session was at least as important as what they understood about the music. He frequently told audiences:

> My goal is not to get you necessarily to understand intellectually, but it's to put you in a frame of mind where you can hear what's there to be heard. In the end it's not about the words you say, it's to have a hearing experience that is not describable. (Kapilow, 1994).

To that end, listeners were encouraged, cajoled, and embarrassed into participating in several activities which were designed to illuminate the music. Counting, clapping, singing, answering questions, giving opinions, and even composing were common activities with all audiences, from preschool to senior citizens.

Movements were often taught before the music was heard; then the music and movements were performed together. After teaching a complex two-part accented clapping version of a section of the pizzicato movement of Bartók's String Quartet No. 4, the excerpt was performed with the clapping "accompaniment." Trying not to clap an accent in the wrong place, audience members strained to see the quartet members who played "their" part. Once the excerpt had been performed this way two or three times, Kapilow's discussion of rhythmic development through diminution became clearer and more meaningful to his listeners.

Question-and-answer exchanges in his sessions contributed a great deal to their interactive nature. Most of Kapilow's questions were of the "notice this" variety. "How many measures are in this phrase? Can you tap your foot to it? How many times do you hear this? Are they all the same? Can you hear they got bigger? How long is the building block? What's it made of?" Answering these types of questions invested the audience members with a sense of ownership of the music.

The subject of many of Kapilow's questions were often his own "bad" versions of the music created to highlight the greatness of the original. He removed surprising elisions, added static accompaniment to an otherwise powerful unison, changed a charming 5+3 phrase into a common 4+4 pattern, and reduced an energetic accompaniment of eighth and sixteenth notes to a plodding string of eighth notes. He removed Haydn's superimposition of duple meter over a minuet, destroying the sense of acceleration in the original. Beethoven's fragmentation of themes was eliminated, leaving the rewritten version predictable and lifeless.

Kapilow typically asked his audiences to compare the "bad" and the "good" versions. Most often, he would perform the original excerpt first, soliciting general comments or asking, "Did that sound particularly complex?" (or witty, outrageous, etc.) The "bad" version followed, with the audience prompted to listen for particular details. After a few repetitions of the "bad" version, the audience was often shocked to hear the original again. As Kapilow stated, "You start to see the magnificence of people's choices so much clearer against the background of the mediocre" (Kapilow, 1995b).

Interaction with a piece of music required accurate perception, but for most people one hearing was usually insufficient to fully uncover its substance. Kapilow employed several strategies for repetition in his sessions. The ensemble (or he at the piano) customarily played excerpts more than once -- sometimes as many as four or five times -- to allow the audience to hear

more fully. Fast tempos were often slowed down, especially when the audience was asked to count or clap along with the performers. Accompaniment was frequently omitted when the focus of listening was on melodic embellishment; likewise, if the topic was accompanimental texture, the melody was omitted. Long excerpts were broken up into shorter passages. If the audience had no reply to a question about an excerpt, it was played again. This always seemed to elicit a response.

Not only did Kapilow encourage his audiences to actively listen to the music, he also modeled good listening by going out of his way to really hear what the audience members said. He routinely took words and phrases from audience members' answers and worked them seamlessly into his ensuing commentary. For example, while talking with Kapilow before a session, some high school string players mentioned their "strolling strings" ensemble. "What's that?" asked Kapilow, and they chatted idly for a while. Later in that session, though, Kapilow described Eine Kleine Nachtmusik as "something you'd play in a strolling orchestra," making the point of its light nature in terms that were relevant to the students.

Unpretentious and Compelling Use of Language. Kapilow's sessions were at once entertaining and educational; he spoke with a definite populist flavor, eschewing specialized musical vocabulary or any sign of pretense. He used stories and metaphors like a virtuoso, comparing complex musical concepts to everyday situations in ways that were often laced with humor. His sensitivity to language was entirely self-conscious and intentional:

> One of the great things about my career is that I talk to such a diversity of people doing music in America. In doing that you become extremely language sensitive; you become really aware of how people are listening to you. I think that is such a valuable thing. (Kapilow, 1995c)

When speaking to non-musicians, he avoided using even the simplest terms: "We're going to call this [quarter note taps] 'one.' This [eighth note taps] we'll call 'two,' and this [sixteenth notes] will be called 'three.'" He playfully sidestepped the word "diminution" contributed by an audience member. "That's right," he acknowledged, "but since the non-musicians don't even know that was an answer, let's get an answer from a non-musician." In Kapilow's sessions, whimsical metaphors replaced technical language and made musical concepts accessible to non-musicians. He explained:

> If it's a college course in music you can talk to musicians directly in that [technical] language, but if you're trying to find a route in [to music for the non-musician], metaphor is the definition of your business. Metaphors are not casual, they are the entire business. (Kapilow, 1995c)

He used metaphors such as "whipped cream" for a trill, "suspects in disguise" for variations on a motive, and "a routine baseball grounder" for a Mozart serenade. Stylistic differences between Mozart and Beethoven were illuminated by comparing Mozart to William F. Buckley and Beethoven to "a Palestinian terrorist." His sense of humor was plainly evident; audiences enjoyed these unusual metaphors, exaggerated characterizations, and quick-witted commentary. Phrases such as "son of whack" (small accents in the Bartók pizzicato movement) and "the Nelson Gallery recoiling in terror" seemed spontaneous, and they generated spontaneous laughter.

In order to maintain the intensity and build the drama of his presentations, Kapilow frequently applied a rhetorical device I called the "set-up." Typically placed between a series of activities and the performance of an excerpt, they were fleeting but not accidental. Kapilow delivered these statements with such vocal intensity that audiences were often amused, as if saying, "He sure gets excited about this Mozart stuff, doesn't he?" Some of Kapilow's typical set-up lines were: "You'll definitely get in 5 minutes what makes Mozart great:" "Now you are about to get it -- you are one step away from the genius of Mozart:" and "You're now in a position to get it -- everybody in this audience."

Perhaps as a manifestation of his ceaseless energy, Kapilow's speech was laced with hyperbole, mild exaggerations which added an amusing flair to his lectures. Words such as "always," "completely," and "absolutely" permeated his discourse. Even Kapilow's master's thesis (Kapilow, 1976) "abounds with modifiers like 'extremely,' 'remarkable,' and 'striking'" (Kovnat, 1994).

Structure

Through the processes of imaginative variation and reflection upon the textural themes previously developed, I sought to represent the meanings, or underlying essences, which Kapilow himself brought to his work. As Dukes suggested, "the logic of human experience is an inherent structural property of the experience itself, not something constructed by an outsider. Human experience is meaningful to those who live it" (1984, p. 198). Kapilow's own words were thus ascribed key significance in the development of structural themes in this phase of the study. The following quotations represent six values which emerged as the structural essences of Kapilow's music teaching activities.

1. "People will always need what I call an aliveness to the world around them."

2. "You have to be responsible for people's listening."
3. "I completely made it fine for him to hate classical music."
4. "People will rise or fall to whatever level of standards you bring them."
5. "To me there are no boundaries."
6. "I'm totally into the subversive education business."

Aliveness. Kapilow clearly stated his attitude toward life in the comment, "I believe in a participatory relationship with the world around you where you're looking at it, asking about it, thinking about it, questioning it" (Kapilow, 1995a). All his teaching activities were driven by the same urge to interact with the music that he felt with his entire world.

> In the end, I'm not trying to get [audiences] to like classical music. I'm trying to get them to have a different conversation with the world around them. To me a concert is not just a set of notes, it's everything you have in your power to get somebody's mind to be different when they walk out of a concert than when they walked in. (Kapilow, 1995c)

Personal Responsibility. The role of personal responsibility was fundamental in Kapilow's understanding of the educational process. All teaching, he said, "is getting somebody excited about learning it themselves" (Kapilow, 1995c). He unequivocally favored a student-centered, rather than a teacher-centered or a content-centered approach to learning. The phrase, "Be responsible for other people's listening" appeared over and over in our interviews. It accounted for his total absence of arrogance and condescension; he simply assumed that if someone in his audience didn't "get it," it was his own (Kapilow's) fault.

Acceptance. Kapilow's sense of personal responsibility extended to the unconditional acceptance of his listeners' attitudes. Whatever they felt about classical music was truly fine with him, and he openly expressed that acceptance. Even the titles of his concerts ["What Makes It Great"] reflected his desire to acknowledge most people's skepticism about classical music.

> The first way to get them [to a concert] is to assume it's your job. You have to create a concert in the first place that is designed for them. Even in the very title I wanted to acknowledge and accept their point of view. It has to be perfectly fine for them to hate it. "What Makes It So Great" is really an acceptance from the title downward. (Kapilow, 1995c)

Standards. To Kapilow, high standards should be lived, not simply discussed. He valued high standards in gardening, poetry, football commentary, and children's literature, as well as music. He saw contemporary discussions of "educational standards" as a fine way to raise people's political consciousness, but as having absolutely no practical value in actually bringing about higher standards in schools. That, he believed, was a matter of personal responsibility.

> Every standard can be made good by a good teacher or absurd by a bad teacher. Do I however think that there's value to having a conversation nationally about it? Sure. Do I think it will change it? Absolutely not. It can't be an intellectual thing. What moves people is being in the presence of [excellence], and seeing that it's exciting. You have to give [students] the experience of standards. (Kapilow, 1995c)

No Boundaries. Ironically, one of the "structural" themes which emerged from Kapilow's interviews was the lack of structure which he brought to his life and his teaching. He did not give credence to artificial distinctions in his life; our discussions often turned on the phrase, "to me they're all the same." Kapilow clearly cherished his unstructured ways of looking at the world.

> It's very clear to me that how you listen to a bar of music is who you are. How you listen to a bar of music is no different that how you listen to your boss, your family, your wife, your friends. The conversation you have with the world at large is no different than the conversation you have with a piece of music. (Kapilow, 1995a)

Subversive Education. The significance of individual responsibility in education which Kapilow stressed was fully explored in Teaching as a Subversive Activity (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). Early our first interview, Kapilow mentioned the profound impression this book had made on him, and he continued to refer to it in each of our subsequent discussions.

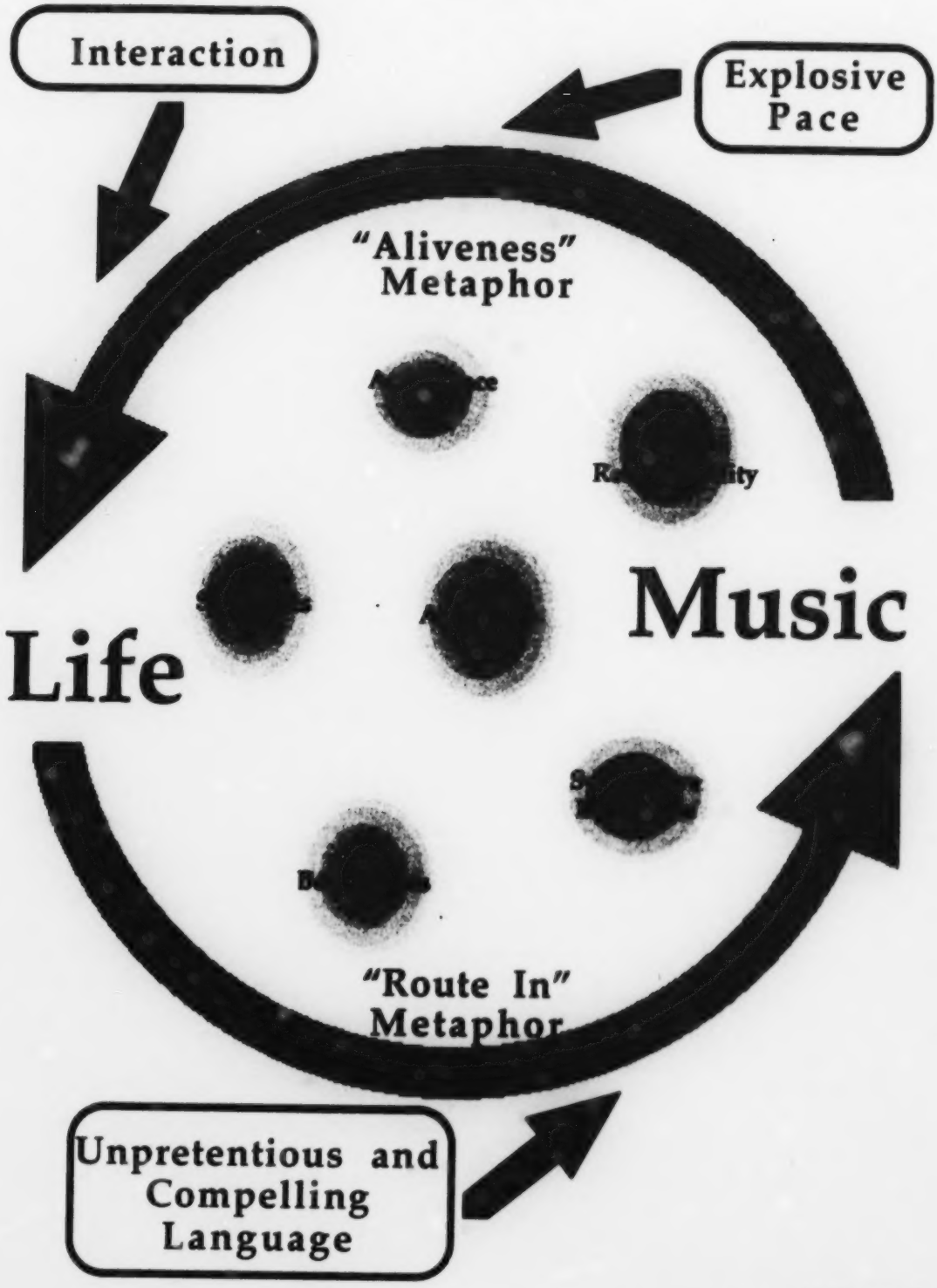
> You know in that book Teaching as a Subversive Activity, one of the things [the authors] want [students] to have is a "built-in crap detector." I really believe in that. I don't believe anyone should listen to anything that anyone says and assume because of anything that it is valid.
>
> People think that the job of teaching is conveying content. There is no content to convey. There is no content separate from finding out what would make relevant content for the person in front of your nose. You have nothing to say unless it's valuable to them. (Kapilow, 1995a)

Exhaustive Description of the Experience

Robert Kapilow's experience of teaching music to diverse audiences is one of sharing his own love of music with as many people as possible, as directly and immediately as possible. He shows people how to have an alive, perceptive interaction with a piece of music; this musical experience then serves as a metaphor, or model, for an alive conversation with life itself.

His use of metaphors is represented in Figure 1 as a continuous circle, serving both as a "route in" to music from people's everyday lives, and also as a way to bring "aliveness" into their lives. Music, in other words, is a means to an end.

Figure 1. Graphic Representation of Kapilow's Teaching



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The most outward characteristics of his teaching, the ones which propel the metaphor cycle, are summarized by the three textural themes: an explosive pace to his life and his teaching, the creation of interactive relationships between the audience and the music, and Kapilow's own compelling and unpretentious use of language. The essences of his teaching, the beliefs and values which guide the entire phenomenon, reside inside the metaphor circle. These beliefs were labeled Aliveness, Personal Responsibility, Subversive Education, No Boundaries, High Standards, and Acceptance.

Significance of the Study

The case of Robert Kapilow is compelling not only because Kapilow himself is colorful and unique, but also because his activities parallel two traditions in the music education field: Music Education as Aesthetic Education (MEAE) and Comprehensive Musicianship (CM). MEAE's chief proponent, Bennett Reimer, stated that it should concentrate "on teaching what is teachable -- aesthetic perception -- in contexts which encourage creative, personal reactions to that which is being perceived" (1989, p. 110). This describes precisely what Kapilow did in his sessions. Reimer and Kapilow seem to agree that musical mastery, rather than the deepening of the musical experience itself, has mistakenly been endorsed as the goal of music education.

> The role of school performance groups is to provide the greatest possible degree of aesthetic sensitivity and musical mastery in the available time. The crucial point [is that] musical mastery must serve the cause of musical perception [i.e., the aesthetic experience]. (Reimer, 1968, p. 112)

> We tend to think that "music education" means to play an instrument. To me, music education is getting to love music. It's wonderful to learn to play the violin, but only if it's in the context of an ongoing love of what you're doing. To just come to an instrument separate from a love of the music that you're playing is a dead end. (Kapilow, 1994a)

Kapilow, however, professed (and possibly possessed as well) greater sensitivity to the effects of language. In our third and final interview, I pressed him for his views on the idea of "aesthetic education." He replied:

> We have to change the word aesthetic. When people hear "aesthetic education," I am telling you, in America they don't want it. If you want to save that movement, forget all that content, forget all the curriculum, change that term. It alienates. Come up with a good substitute term. Aesthetic education could transform America and be in every school, but it won't be until it changes it title. (Kapilow, 1995c)

The Comprehensive Musicianship movement did not originate from the philosophical writings of anyone in particular; rather, it grew out of a need for public school music teachers to

better understand and be able to teach 20th century music. It appears similar to Kapilow's activities in its attempt to de-emphasize the boundaries between music composition, education, theory, history, and performance. However, the "logical, continuous educational program" which early proponents of CM tried to create in the Hawaii Music Curriculum Project (Thomson, 1970, p.73) would be viewed as pointless and irrelevant by Kapilow. By removing both teachers and students from the tasks of goal-setting and literature selection, the Hawaii curriculum forfeited all relevance. In spite of high expectations, it lasted only a few years.

More recent manifestations of CM such as the Wisconsin Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance model (WCMP) have more in common with "subversive" education (Wisconsin Music Educators Association, 1987). Both are flexible approaches to curriculum development; this is simultaneously their strength and their great drawback. Teachers cannot be handed a curriculum to implement in either approach. One by one, in each of their classrooms, teachers must become the agents of curriculum development for either approach to succeed. It takes far less risk to "buy" a neatly packaged curriculum "product" such as the Hawaii curriculum than to assume individual responsibility for creating a relevant and effective learning process from scratch. Hence, movements like CM tend to gather incredible momentum for a short time. Like most new products, however, the "teacher-proof curriculum" loses its shine after a few years and ends up on the shelf.

The implications of this research are thus clear. Kapilow's teaching can serve as a model for music teachers who are faced with administrative and political pressure to implement the widely publicized National Standards. Kapilow's beliefs about teaching can inspire each music educator to accept the Standards as a personal challenge to improve his or her teaching process, rather than as a prefabricated curriculum product mandated from the ivory tower. When he defined CM as a process 20 years ago, David Willoughby also unwittingly described both Kapilow's teaching and the true nature of the National Standards. He wrote, "Comprehensive Musicianship is more of an approach, attitude, or process than a method. It has been defined as simply creative teaching" (Willoughby, 1977, p. 5).

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